



She wanted to be invisible in the crowd; to be a part of the grey-blond-faded-brown culture that streamed around her every day.



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Jenny Sounds Like a Girl Who's Fun (a novel excerpt) by Zuzanna Fimińska

She ran into a drugstore in search of permanent hair dye but they only had washable and the realization that she couldn't get what she needed felt like a punch to the stomach. She grabbed two packs of chocolate brown just to stop herself from puking in the hair care aisle. She could leave, walk around, find the right product, but that would require time and expose her to others. Her hair – her hair! – people would notice her hair. They would stare, point, whisper. She hated her red waves. The hair that captured everybody's attention that made everyone look at her, talk about her, remember her. The hair that made her 'that girl' – the girl that was not sufficiently common to pass unnoticed, but also not extraordinary enough to be singled out and treasured. She wanted to blend in. She wanted to be invisible in the crowd; to be a part of the grey-blond-faded-brown culture that streamed around her every day. She walked toward the cashier, and avoiding eye contact, threw the boxes on the counter, waited for the scanning noise – beep – beep – threw down a fifty-euro banknote and ran out of the store without waiting for the change.

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She ran home and, her hands shaking, barely unlocked the door. She stormed into the bathroom, tore the boxes, took a plastic bottles out of each one, and mixed the products without consulting the leaflet. She squeezed the dye from both bottles onto the top of her head and massaged it into her hair. It was dripping. It stained her clothes – the floor – the sink – the walls – everything became covered in smears of chocolate brown hair dye. She didn't care. She needed to get rid of her red hair. She needed to disappear. She needed to be common.

Thirty minutes. That's how long it would've taken for her hair to absorb the dye. That's how long she had to sit still for her red waves to become history. She paced up and down her room, circled around the bathroom door – thirty seconds – rearranged the dishes on the kitchen shelf – two minutes – sat down on the floor and removed the purple laces from her white sneakers before tying them up again – three minutes – got back up, leaped to her dresser and removed everything from the drawers, starting with the bottom one and working her way up, unfolding and refolding her clothes – six minutes – until she lost her patience, grabbed a pair of tweezers and started plucking the hair on her left forearm. The pinch of the hair being pulled out of her skin became a new measure of time – seven minutes – but resigned and unable to keep her focus, she sat

on the bathroom floor and stared at her wristwatch counting its ticks – eight minutes – she bit her nail and a bit of blood showed up in the corner of her thumb – eight minutes thirty seconds – she sucked her thumb before pulling the patch of skin a little further, opening the wound – nine minutes. That was it.

She jumped into the shower fully clothed. The thick brown water glazed her shirt and jeans as the hot stream burned her face, but instead of adding cold water, she held her breath and bit her lips. When she got out of the shower and examined her hair in the mirror, she could tell that the color was uneven, but she decided it would suffice, at least for the night. Reassured, she stripped off her clothes and put them in the bathroom sink. She dried her skin, and searched for fresh underwear, when someone rang her doorbell.

‘Just a second!’ She snarled, but whoever was at the door couldn’t hear her and started to knock.

‘What?!’ She opened the door wrapped in a towel.

‘I brought you food... This is interesting...’ Oscar stretched his hand out to wipe the smear off her temple when he realized they were practically strangers. He took his hand back. ‘Can I come in?’

‘I’d rather you didn’t.’

‘What happened to your hospitality?’ He made a step forward, but she pushed him away, so he shoved her to the side to reach the kitchen annex, where he stuffed a large lunch box into the microwave, ignoring Francis’s plea for him to leave.

‘We just met. You could at least keep up the appearances,’ he said. ‘Put on some clothes,’ he added and, miraculously, she obeyed. Seven minutes later, he passed her a steaming lunch box.

‘Eat.’

‘I’m not hungry,’ she said standing in the doorway of the bathroom.

‘I didn’t ask you,’ he pulled her by the arm and forced to sit at the table, while

holding the lunch box in his free hand. She knocked the food out of his grip. He twisted her wrist.

‘You treat your girlfriend this way, too?’ She squealed.

‘She loves it,’ he hissed. She knew he was looking at the circles around her eyes, the collarbones lurking from underneath her skin, the long, thin neck and the patches of brown dye, grotesquely distributed across her hair. ‘You will eat, there’s plenty of food. Now sit.’

She did as ordered.

He pulled another box from the bag he came with, and while it rotated in the microwave, he picked up the food Fran had spilled. She sat quietly at the table, watching him vigilantly, like a wild animal waiting for an opportunity to escape.

‘I’m not leaving until you’re finished,’ Oscar threw a box of risotto on the table in front of her. ‘I have the whole day.’ He added jumping on the counter, where he sat rolling a fork between his fingers. She pushed the food around the container before putting a bit of food on top of the fork and lifting it to her mouth. She chewed slowly, aware of how ridiculous she looked. When she was done, he jumped on the floor, took one more container from the bag, heated it up and put it in front of Francis.

‘Have some more,’ he instructed sitting next to her at the table. ‘Finish this one and I’ll leave you alone.’ He added trying to catch her eye, but she avoided looking at him. He got up and unloaded the remainder of the food he brought into the fridge, which was filled with tomatoes and wine.

‘Now, *that’s* interesting...When was the last time you ate anything substantial?’

She ate quickly, ignoring his question.

‘Done!’ She pushed the empty dish toward his side of the table. ‘You can leave now,’ she added, pushing him toward the door. ‘Thank you for coming, and thanks for the food, it was great, a real treat, now please get out.’

‘Call me when you run out of food,’ he said after she shut the door behind him.

When he was gone, she hunched over the kitchen sink – cold metal pinched her belly

– and drank water until she felt the contents of her stomach rise inside her. She then stuck her fingers down her throat and wiggled them a little until her stomach violently contracted and she felt the food with the tips of her fingernails. A few minutes later, empty, she slid against the kitchen cabinet, pulled her thighs to her chest, and rested her forehead on her knees.

She needed a new name.

Jenny. Jenny sounds like a girl who is fun and loose and adventurous and carefree and popular. *Jenny. One of many!* Jenny doesn't wear underwear with her dress and abandons her lovers before they wake up. She's loud and relaxed. *Jenny.* She throws her head back in a way that makes her hair trap the light, tempting men to run their fingers through it. She dances consciously, like everyone is watching, and she smiles with a head tilt that exposes her neck.

'Jenny...' Fran whispered, and got a midnight blue dress out of the wardrobe. It was low cut at the back. Before she slipped into it, she brushed her teeth and groomed her hair. She sprayed her neck and wrists with Coco Mademoiselle, put on red lipstick and a pair of beige, mid-heel sandals, and on her way out snatched a small, brown leather bag that contained her keys and wallet. She locked the door and trotted down the hallway. Her hair caressed her back and shoulders.

Jenny headed toward the street, where she boarded a tram stuffed with heat, sweat and human bodies. She stood by the door, feeling a droplet trickle down her back, bottom, and thighs, making her painfully aware of the contour of her body. She got off at the Rembrandtplein and, relieved to be back on a melting street, she sat on the bench at the tram stop, waiting for the dizziness to go away. Feeling better after a while, she went to an Australian bar on the opposite side of the square.

It was still early in the evening so most of the barstools and tables were unoccupied. When she walked in, a bartender waved at her, as if they knew each other, and she waved back, although she didn't recognize him. Her shoes were sticking to the floor when she sat at the far end of the bar and ordered whiskey with coke.

She finished the drink in two gulps.

‘Can I get you another one?’ A guy with an Aussie accent asked, and, without waiting for her answer ordered whiskey for her and a gin for himself. There was something adorable about his face – it made her think of a those tiny creatures with those massive eyes – maybe if he had shaved, he could pass off as handsome. He introduced himself nonchalantly, wrapping his hand around the glass. There was dirt underneath his evenly clipped, round fingernails.

‘*Jenny*,’ she replied to her own glass.

A couple drinks later, they moved on to a table, and he sat next to her on a bench. As they continued making small-talk, he put his hand on her knee and leaned in to kiss her, but she turned her head away and his lips landed on her cheek. She excused herself to the toilet, and as she was about to climb the stairs, she turned around to make sure he wasn't looking, and ran out of the bar.

She ran all the way across the Blauwbrug, where she slowed down to remember the address. She turned right and continued toward the Botanical Garden., and when she finally found the right door –thank God it was open! – she barged into the building and jumped a few steps before turning back to check the tenants’ names. She needed to go to the third floor.

When Alistair opened the door, he saw a ghastly-looking girl whose hair looked bizarre, and whose lips were dry with patches of skin blistering off. Without asking if she could come in, she walked past him and headed toward the bathroom, locked the door, climbed into the bathtub fully clothed and turned on the cold water. Shivers sprouted up her spine, forcing her eyes open, thrusting her teeth into the lining of her mouth, rasping the skin off her forehead, nose, and chin. The water rinsed the summer sweat off her skin, as she watched a thin streak of brown diluted dye rushing down her chest, through her dress, over her knees all the way to her ankles, where it left permanent stains on the straps of her sandals. Her toes turned purple and her body became someone else’s.

Alistair knocked on the door.

‘Francis? You okay? Francis? I’m leaving a fresh towel for you on the floor right outside the door, grab it when you’re ready.’ He couldn’t hear whether she responded through the running water, so he pressed against the door, listening for the splashes of feet against the floor of the bathtub, but there was nothing.

‘Francis, could you please say something? Please just let me know that you hear me?’ He banged on the door with an open palm, but there was no reaction. ‘Francis! Are you all right? Say something!’ He pulled on the doorknob. ‘Open the door! I will have to let myself in if you don’t say anything! Francis! Open the bloody door!’

Resigned, he reached for his keys and turned the lock on the door. He found Francis tucked into the bend of the tub, curled under the stream of freezing water, knees touching her chin, hair crawling across her face, eyes dead open.

He turned off the faucet, lifted her out of the tub, wrapped her in a towel, and made her sit on the floor mat before removing her shoes. He left for a couple of minutes and came back with a bathrobe and another towel that he used to dry her hair, face and shoulders. He swathed her in the bathrobe and, careful not to expose her, peeled off her dress, which he hung on the clothesline. He then took her face into his hands and stared at her silently – he smelled like fabric softener – she looked back at him fearful, vulnerable and not ready to be rejected. He asked if she’d like to be carried to the couch so she could lie down comfortably, but she said it wasn’t necessary, she was feeling fine, if mightily ashamed. He told her not to worry and revealed that his favorite food was instant porridge, so it seemed like we all had things to blush about. She laughed.

He helped her get up, and when they were on their way out of the bathroom, his hand purposefully brushed against hers, and she turned around and kissed him. He faltered and as she was about to withdraw, he kissed her back, intent on lulling her torment. She knew she wasn’t unique – not to him, not to herself, not to anybody she knew – at least not in an extent that would make anyone want to protect her. She wished he would dismember her and pull her apart. She wanted him to torture her, but when he caressed her throat, she choked, not from the struggle for air,

but from the loss of control. His hand then moved across her shoulders, the bathrobe dropped to the ground with a thud, and he scratched her ribcage with the buckle of his watch. He was confident and prescribed, and she thought he must have slept with dozens of women beforehand, and regretted not being able to just toss him around. She felt weak, and self-conscious, and as her back touched the carpet in the hallway, she realized Alistair would be her first second lover, and she was sure she'd disappoint him.

She took his shirt off and – trembling from uncertainty – she curved with expectations when their bodies touched. She wanted to take his pants off, too, but he brushed her hand off, and when she tried again he twisted her wrist, which pissed her off, and she tried to roll over, but he pinned her back down. She slapped his cheek, and he slapped her back, before stroking her palms and wrists with his tongue, caressing her out of panic, out of herself, letting her imagine that perhaps she could be enough, but she fought back, quivering, guarded against the delusion that he cared. He moved down, fondling the inside of her thigh with his lips, teasing her, and she whispered in a pleading protest, pretending her ache for him had become overpowering. He spiraled and plunged into her, and she reached for his hand. As he flitted around her, she thought about music and maths and the world's need for average people. He kissed a spot on the inside of her left thigh, so close and so tenderly, yet it still spread numbness through her body, and as he moved methodically toward her knee, she clenched his fingers that were intertwined with hers. He then moved back up, caressing her freckled belly, and the sensitive spot under her false ribs, which were sticking out. She started weeping. He pulled himself up, draped the robe on her frame, and held her.